



West Nile Virus Encephalitis

During the summer of 1999, the New York City area encountered an epidemic of West Nile viral (WNV) encephalitis. This outbreak was the certain or probable cause of 61 cases of encephalitis, including seven deaths in the New York metropolitan area. These were the first appearances of WNV in the Western Hemisphere. Birds, especially those in the crow family, are the natural hosts of this virus, which is transmitted by mosquitoes from them to other birds and to mammals, including humans. In response to the possibility that migrating birds could spread the disease into Virginia, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) will enhance surveillance for WNV and arboviral (viruses spread by arthropods, mosquitoes) encephalitis. This surveillance will include rapid laboratory diagnosis of human cases coupled with avian, mosquito, and mammal surveillance.

The Lenowisco Health District will be assisting in mosquito surveillance for WNV as a part of its ongoing mosquito surveillance program monitoring LaCrosse virus, another mosquito transmitted infection which caused seven cases of meningitis/encephalitis in the past three years in Wise county and neighboring counties. This is a milder form of illness, generally than WNV, and all cases recovered. Deaths due to LaCrosse are extremely rare.

Health department staff will trap adult mosquitoes evaluating the species type for both LaCrosse and WNV carrying types of mosquitoes. Also they will report and potentially collect for testing, dead crows and bluejays as part of the WNV surveillance. The public is asked to report any unusual observances of dead crows by calling their local health department. Only report clusters (three or more) of dead birds that appear to have died of natural causes or were seen acting strangely. Individuals are cautioned not to handle the dead or sick birds. Health department personnel will collect the specimens. Birds whose death is due to obvious external causes, such as shooting, should not be reported.

If you have questions about either form of encephalitis or the surveillance work or if you wish to report dead birds, please call Wise County health department at 328-8000; Lee County Health Department at 346-2011 and Scott County Health Department at 386-1312.